

Submission to the public exhibition of the Draft NSW Water Strategy

from: WATER Northern Rivers

Water Northern Rivers acknowledges the work done by DPIE in developing the Draft NSW Water Strategy. We recognise that the Draft Water Strategy addresses a wide range of water supply issues and lists a diverse suite of effective options to meet future water needs. We also see clearly that the Strategy builds substantially on the work and recommendations of the NSW Productivity Commission in its Green Paper section on Water and Energy. Water NR broadly supports the draft strategy and particularly supports all those supply options which are scalable, flexible, and that avoid environmental and Indigenous Cultural Heritage damage.

Water Northern Rivers has previously engaged extensively with the DPIE in the consultation process of the Draft Far North Coast Regional Water Strategy. In that phase we addressed our concern with the particularly unreliable and damaging option of the proposed Dunoon dam, and those concerns, together with positive alternatives, were covered in our subsequent submission, which is on record with DPIE and should be considered as an appendix to this submission.

This submission addresses broader issues than a single supply option in a single region. As our understanding of water supply issues increases, it becomes even clearer to us that work on stormwater harvesting and water reuse must proceed urgently at a state level.

In a significant and historic decision in December 2020, Rous County Council voted to authorise its general manager to cease all work on the Dunoon Dam and provide a report on the orderly exit from Dunoon Dam as an option in the Future Water Project, for many of the same reasons we articulated in our Far North Coast Regional Plan submission. What we have subsequently observed is the deliberate activation of a “toilet-to-tap” scare campaign against reusable water by the proponents of the dam.

Never has the need been greater for strong leadership at the state level to counter this type of misinformation, and to move forward with the Productivity Commission recommendations via the NSW Water Strategy.

Water Northern Rivers has chosen to make a direct written submission on the Draft Strategy in order to sharply focus on areas of key, and agreed, concern amongst our members. We elaborate our views in six focus areas below.

1 Indigenous heritage

Water Northern Rivers believes the people best placed to comment on the Indigenous aspects of the policy are Aboriginal communities including at grass-roots level, but we also acknowledge and strongly support the significant focus areas in the plan for:

- improving and enabling access to Country, to maintain healthy waterways and engage in cultural practices.
- protection of Aboriginal culture and heritage, by meaningful engagement with Aboriginal communities upstream and downstream of new infrastructure proposals.
- recognition and protection of Aboriginal water rights, interests and cultural values— including [Aboriginal heritage assets](#) (pg. 10)

We welcome the Indigenous employment opportunities implicit in the aim to: "Work with Aboriginal people to maintain and preserve water-related cultural sites and landscapes" (pg. 42), and urge significant resources be devoted to this.

2 Diversification of supply

Water Northern Rivers advocates strongly for increased diversification in supply options within regions as the best way to ensure resilient water security. Just as stockbrokers suggest a diverse investment portfolio to cut risk, so we say supply authorities must diversify their water sources.

- As groundwater supplies become an increasingly important part of the supply mix, an enhanced state-wide focus on sustainable groundwater management is essential and is endorsed by Water Northern Rivers (pg. 78).
- Stormwater harvesting, direct and indirect PRW, and renewable-powered desalination, are all supply options which need to be available as choices for local supply authorities, with the active support of the DPIE. We note the draft recommendations of both State and Federal Productivity commissions in this regard.
[\[https://www.productivity.nsw.gov.au/green-paper/water-energy \]](https://www.productivity.nsw.gov.au/green-paper/water-energy)
[\[https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/water-reform-2020/draft \]](https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/water-reform-2020/draft)
- We endorse the high level approaches (pg. 27) outlined, to :
 - Expand rainfall independent water sources.
 - Adopt recycling for supply augmentation.
- We strongly support "Proactive support for water utilities to diversify sources of water" (pg. 121), including managed aquifer recharge (pg. 122), as a component of "closing the loop" as far as possible with water consumption.

3 Climate Impacts

Water Northern Rivers strongly endorses the use of “Worst Case Scenarios” (pg. 86) in modelling and planning for our future generations’ water security. Whilst the NSW government has committed to net zero emissions by 2050, there is significant risk that the global target will not be met. In preparing for the worst, better resilient systems will be built. [https://library.wmo.int/doc_num.php?explnum_id=10211]

- Rainfall dependent systems become increasingly unreliable as climate change accelerates. This increases the importance of rapidly developing non-rainfall-dependent supply sources throughout the state.

4 Water Efficiency

Water Northern Rivers supports significant investment in advanced water efficiency as a cost-effective method of effectively increasing supply.

This can be implemented at both the supply authority and end-user level.

- Investment in Research and Development in this area is strongly supported.
- Water Northern Rivers strongly agrees that *“The role of water efficiency should have equal standing with additional supply side options when balancing supply and demand to ensure water is being used efficiently before imposing costs on the community for additional water infrastructure.”* (pg. 118)

It would be highly desirable if the NSW government assisted regional utilities in cost-benefit analysis, planning and execution of system-wide water efficiency programs such as this one recommended by Professor Stuart White in this brief review:

<https://waternorthernrivers.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Prof-Stuart-White-Brief-Review-Rous-Water-augmentation-20200904-1.pdf> , and this draft program:

<https://waternorthernrivers.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Prof-Stuart-White-Rous-Water-RSWP-slides-20200904-1.pdf>

5 Investment in change, security and new technology

Water Northern Rivers believes it is imperative to have significant investment in:

- System change, through support for local authorities to collaborate, and change practices and through removal of regulatory barriers to cost effective water reuse.
- Water security, through research and development for, and of, diversified sources.
- New technology, both for non-rainfall sources such as desalination and Purified Recycled Water, and for water efficiency.
- We note the Productivity Commission recommendation 5.5, for a pilot/demonstration plant for Recycled Water:

[https://www.productivity.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/Productivity%20Green%20Paper Consolidated.pdf](https://www.productivity.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/Productivity%20Green%20Paper%20Consolidated.pdf) (pg. 154). We understand that Rous County Council has a “shovel-ready” pilot project awaiting funding just outside Lismore, and is able to partner with Southern Cross University. We urge this regional investment be progressed rapidly in line with Productivity Commission recommendations.

6 Educating the community

Water Northern Rivers believes that programs for water literacy must be fast-tracked, and resourced appropriately

- During the last major drought, fifty communities in NSW faced water supply failure
- NSW climate projections indicate reduced rainfall and increased extreme heat.
- Water utilities have an obligation and need to engage communities, but communities have limited understanding of options, which limits their ability to participate in an informed way
- There is an urgent need to increase informed engagement and decision-making
- Misinformation is a barrier to water security
- Rural water utilities have limited capacity to increase water literacy

It is highly desirable that DPIE resource effective water literacy education programs that cover:

- The underlying issues and science
- Supply options
- Climate resilience
- What households, industry and communities can do

Water Northern Rivers believes platforms for delivering effective water literacy education could include:

- a Community Advocate program to amplify reach
- a NSW mobile water literacy learning unit

Water literacy resources that are urgently needed are:

- Memes and graphics for social media that address common misunderstandings
- Short graphic animation videos that dispel common myths
- Printed resources including leaflets, FAQ, and myth-busting (including countering 'toilet to tap' misinformation)

About WATER Northern Rivers:

WATER Northern Rivers is an alliance of citizens and groups who want a complementary mix of modern water options. We are committed to a water system fit for the 21st century, one we can be proud of.

For more information: <https://waternorthernrivers.org/about-us/>